Jesus Had a Father
December 4, 2011

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Psalm 85:1–2, 8–13
Matthew 1:18–25

“Joseph, . . . do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.”
Matthew 1:20 (NRSV)

For he who kindled
The fire of the sun . . .
Has also carved our names
In the palm of his hand

And he became a child
The better to be near us
Born in the wintertime
Born on a journey . . .
To be our healing . . .
Our bread . . . the wine
At all our weddings.

Anne Porter
“Here on Earth”
An Altogether Different Language: Poems

Startle us, O God, with the news that you come into the world in the most ordinary ways: in daily work, in love, in human birth and life and death. Startle us with your truth, that your love continues to come to be with us, to comfort and challenge and heal and feed our deepest hunger. Now silence in us any voice but yours: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thank goodness Joseph of Nazareth wasn’t a literalist about biblical mandates and religious rules. If he had been, this Christian story of ours would have ended before it ever got going. Joseph, at the very beginning of the Christian story, shows a remarkable ability to listen to his heart and not to the rule book, the religious law, or social convention. And he is, I think, worth our attention as we prepare to welcome and celebrate the birth of his son, or at the very least, the little boy to whom Joseph was father.

Over the years of being a man and a father, Joseph has moved to the center, for me, along with his wife, Mary.

He doesn't get much press. All the art and poetry and music is about Mary. Joseph has almost none. Ann Weems wrote a great poem once that asked, "Who put Joseph in the back of the stable? Who dressed him in brown, put a staff in his hand, and told him to stand in the back?" (*Kneeling in Bethlehem* p. 52).

That's pretty much it for Joseph: standing in the back, watching. The best expression of Joseph's dilemma I know came from a little girl, four or five years old. It was Linda Loving's niece, and I've told this several times, but it's too good not to tell it once more. Linda's little niece, Megan, and Megan's mother, Laura, Linda's sister, also a Presbyterian minister, were drawing a picture of the nativity one day in Advent. Megan was deeply involved in the project, drawing every detail of Mary and her baby in the manger, sheep and cows, wise men and their camels and their fabulous gifts, the shepherds and lambs, even a few cats and dogs. Someone was missing. "Where is Joseph, Megan?" Laura asked. And Megan, bless her heart, spoke for the ages when she answered, "Who needs Joseph, anyhow?"

Joseph disappears in the biblical narrative a few years after Jesus' birth. There is one more mention of Joseph, when Jesus is twelve and his mother and father take him to Jerusalem. And then no more mention of Joseph.

Historians tell us that the marriage custom in first-century Palestine was for a mature man to choose a young woman to marry, pay the family the required betrothal fee, and then wait for the young woman to mature before marrying her. And so the conventional assumption has been that Joseph was considerably older than Mary and died at an early age. But there is no evidence for that other than the silence of the New Testament. I rather like to assume that Joseph, however old he was, lived for the next twenty or thirty years and was a presence in Jesus' life through infancy, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

One thing is for sure: at the very beginning of the story, Joseph does a most remarkable thing. He and Mary are engaged to be married. Betrothed it was called, and it was a social and religious contract overseen by the local rabbi. Joseph paid the fee. There probably was a betrothal party, and then the wedding plans began. Joseph returned to his home and started to prepare it for his bride. Mary went back home to live in her parents' household. By custom and law, they began to see more of each other. Weddings were big, as big, if not bigger than ours, planned for a long time. When the time came, the groom, with great fanfare, went to the bride's

home to claim her. The couple stood before a rabbi, surrounded by their families and friends, and made their promise. And then the party began—a party that would go on for days, with lots of food and drink and celebrating.

Planning for a wedding then, and now, is a major undertaking. But right in the middle of these plans a disaster happens. The bride-to-be is pregnant. We don't know how many people knew. Surely Mary told her mother. She did tell her fiancé, Joseph. Joseph, by the way, is described as a "righteous man." That means he takes his religion seriously, lives his religion every day, attends synagogue, and to the very best of his ability lives according to the religious law. He knows he is not the father. The law has provisions for this: two provisions, actually. The more severe is stoning, for adultery (the law, in this instance, regarded them as married). The less severe is divorce—given the circumstances, a messy divorce. Joseph would have to go to the rabbi and explain why the contract has to be broken and Mary's shame would be public. Nazareth was a small town. Everyone would know sooner or later. Joseph, however, is not only righteous, but also kind. He decides to divorce Mary as quietly as possible to limit her shame. It had to have been a torturous decision. He had to have felt embarrassed, humiliated, angry. William Willimon quips, "If Mary is most blessed among women, Joseph is most embarrassed among men." It was a difficult, but necessary decision. And then the dreams start. An angel: "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus."

What in the world do you with a dream like that?

Joseph does the most extraordinary thing. He trusts the dream. He sets aside his deepest social and moral conventions. Caught between his religion's rules and his heart, his love for Mary, he goes with his heart. Fred Craddock imagines Joseph sharing his dilemma with friends and friends advising "Just do what the Bible says, Joseph. You can't go wrong if you just do what the Bible says." Craddock reflects, "I've heard that all my life: just listen to the Bible" and then illustrates with clear biblical mandates that we do not follow.

> "She is to be taken out and stoned to death in front of people."
> "If a man finds something displeasing in his wife, let him give her a divorce and send her out of town."
> "Let the women keep their heads covered and their mouths shut in church."

"Joseph is a good man," Craddock said, "and rises to a point that is absolutely remarkable for his day and time. He knows his Bible and loves his Bible and bless his heart for it. But he reads his Bible through a certain kind of lens, the lens of the character and nature of God, who is loving and

kind. Therefore, he says, “I will not harm her, abuse her, expose her, shame her, ridicule her. I will protect her. . . . Where does it say that in your Bible, Joseph? I’ll tell you where it says that. It says that in the very nature and character of God” (*The Collected Sermons of Fred Craddock,* p. 66).

So the interrupted wedding plans are sped up. A wedding happens between a groom and pregnant bride, and the Christian story proceeds. Nine months later, or maybe eight or seven months—my mother-in-law, a very wise woman, used to say that first babies can come any time; second babies take nine months—Joseph takes his wife on the ninety mile journey, fifteen, maybe twenty miles a day, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, his birthplace, to be registered in a census. The inn is full, so they spend the night in the stable out back, and that is where she gives birth. Joseph is all the help she has. How did he know what to do? There was no obstetrician, no midwife; just Joseph, and he does what he has to do.

There are more dreams. King Herod has heard about the birth and is in a mad rage. An angel tells Joseph to take his wife and child to Egypt where they remain until Herod dies, maybe a year or two or three. They live with the large Jewish community in Cairo. Then another dream. “Take your family back to Nazareth,” which he does, and then Joseph disappears.

Roman Catholics and Protestants divide at this point. Rome insists and Catholics believe that Mary’s virginity is perpetual. Protestants believe she had more children: Jesus had brothers and sisters; Joseph was the father. When the Bible says Jesus’ brothers and sisters, Catholics translate the Greek word as cousins or kin. It doesn’t matter a whole lot unless your faith depends on Mary’s virginity. But it does matter in so far as the elevation of Mary, historically, has meant the diminishment of Joseph. Biblical and literary and art scholars tell us that is what happened: the more attention paid to Mary, the less to Joseph, particularly if Mary remains a virgin.

So here is an alternative. They made the long trek from Egypt to Nazareth and settled down as a young family. Joseph resumed his work as a carpenter, more children came. His oldest son, Jesus, watched his father be a father, be a man. When he was old enough, Joseph took Jesus to the synagogue on the sabbath, where Jesus learned to read and speak Hebrew and where, at the age of twelve, he stood in the assembly and read from the Torah, just as Jewish boys and girls still do in their Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. I imagine Joseph showing Jesus how to handle a saw and a plane properly, how to make a door with a working lock, how to make a square joint, dig a foundation, level a table.

Archeologists have made an amazing discovery in recent years of the ruins of a major Roman city, Sepphoris, just four miles from Nazareth, a big city with villas, colonnaded streets, a forum, a theater and plenty of work for

carpenters. I imagine Joseph and Jesus walking the four miles from Nazareth to dig foundations and build houses. I imagine them pausing to listen to the street orators, the poets, maybe watching a play before returning home. I imagine Jesus learning the use of language, and metaphor and humor and how to tell a good story on those days with his father in Sepphoris.

Jesus learned to be a man in the way most of us learn to be a man, or a woman, by watching our parents, or other parent figures, our models and mentors. Joseph, I think, was Jesus' model and mentor.

I think about mine a lot and thank God every day for them. I was blessed to have a father and father-in-law who showed me how to be a father by faithfully doing what they had to do to shelter, clothe, and feed their families. Both worked very hard at physically demanding and dirty jobs. My father, a railroad fireman and then an engineer, for years shoveled coal into the fire box of a steam locomotive for eight hours and came home exhausted and covered with coal dust. My father-in-law, who worked in the railroad shops all his life, in his sixties was still burning old wooden boxcars with an acetylene torch, coming home exhausted and with holes in his work shirt from the acetylene sparks. They did not have vocational choices. They didn't think much about themselves. They did what they had to do to provide for their families, and I like to think that is what Joseph did for his wife and for Jesus and for his family. And I think, further, that Joseph shows us that doing what is necessary, doing the humble, ordinary thing, is God's work: getting up every day and going to work at a job you might not particularly like but going anyway because others are depending on you. God's work is in the ordinary, necessary things: changing diapers, preparing the meal, driving the bus, loving the child.

If my alternate scenario is plausible, and I believe it is, I can't help but wonder if Joseph ever shared with Jesus the mysterious circumstances of Jesus' birth and his mother's pregnancy. I don't think he did, because I can't imagine that Joseph was ever as clear about it as Matthew's spare account indicates. Consistent with his faithful, strong acceptance of responsibility, I imagine he kept it all to himself. But I do wonder, if on those long walks down the road home from Sepphoris in the cool of early evening, as the sun was setting—a time for father-son talks—I wonder if Joseph didn't talk to Jesus about religion and how important the religion of his people was but how sometimes religious rules, religious customs, religious and social conventions get in the way of doing the right thing. I wonder if it wasn't Joseph who told Jesus to be thoughtful about all the religious assumptions of the culture, to be faithful—not so much to religion, but to God and conscience—and, when those two are in conflict, to listen to your conscience and trust your heart. I wonder if it wasn't Joseph, out of his own experience, his love for Mary, which transcended the rules and regulations

of religion and social convention, who taught Jesus the power of love to overcome evil, to redeem and create all things new.

And I wonder if it wasn't his father whom Jesus was remembering on the day he walked into a crowd of angry, self-righteous religionists, with stones in their hands ready to do what the Bible says, about to exact biblical justice on a woman by stoning her to death, and he stopped it and forgave the woman and told her to live and sin no more.

And I wonder if it wasn't Joseph whom Jesus was remembering when he told that story one day, that unforgettable story, about a father who ignores social and religious convention, ignores even his son's flagrant sin, who breaks every rule in the book when he sees his son on the road and runs to meet him and welcome and embrace him.

There is a medieval French woodcut that I loved learning about, of Joseph, the strong carpenter, with a mallet in his hand and in his other strong arm, his infant son, and Joseph's head is tilted down so that his head is gently touching Jesus' head. Strong, responsible, gentle, faithful (in Morton Kelsey, *The Drama of Christmas,* pp. 33–39).

Joseph's son came to show the world a new way of being human: that the ultimate moral criterion is love and that love, God's love, is the final power in the universe. Thanks be to God for Joseph's part in that story of salvation.

He does have one carol, a sixteenth-century German carol, sung by Mary to Joseph. It's a favorite of mine, and I asked John Sherer if he might have the choir sing it to help me finish this sermon.

> "Joseph dearest, Joseph mine,
> Help me cradle this child of mine;
> God reward thee and all that's thine,
> In paradise," so prays the mother Mary.
> He came among us at Christmastime
> At Christmastime in Bethlehem.

Amen.